

Good Morning Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee,

My name is Jenifer Gursky. I am a student at The University of Montana. I currently work on behalf of the Associated Students of the University of Montana and represent over 15,000 students today.

As a Political Science Major, I know our public servants and representatives need to make difficult decisions. Questions like, "How will I make policies that foster economic growth?" How can I protect the valued Montana life-style, while allowing people to have individual freedoms? How can I fund essential services that protect Montanans while fostering a responsible government?

I do not envy the decisions you have to make.

However, I stand here today as a fifth generation Montanan hailing from the beautiful Flathead Valley. I am a non-traditional student who decided vocational ministry was my path early in life. It was while working three jobs and running a small youth group in Polson that I decided to go overseas for missions work. After studying in Amsterdam, I moved to Cambodia to work with the poorest of the poor. I provided vitamin supplements and nutrition to people who were dying of AIDS while living on a compacted dirt floor, with little hope of seeing the New Year. It was in one of the poorest nations of the globe I gained a value for formal education as a way society responds to economic growth.

From a dirty internet kiosk in Pnom Phen Cambodia, I applied to The University of Montana. Studying Political Science and International Development, I sought something in addition to my faith as an answer to poverty and desperation. It was education.

While it would be grossly inaccurate for me to compare Montana's Higher Education funding to the absolute absences of state funded education in Cambodia, I stand here today knowing what a public education can do for society.

I started at a two year college in Wyoming, mostly because even a few years ago it was cheaper to go there than to start at The University for me. I leave next year with nearly 30,000 dollars in debt. Please understand while I know this was a decision that was mine, it restricts options for me in my desired career field. Both my parents have had long careers as public school educators, and while I would absolutely love to follow in the footsteps of public servants, I cannot until my responsibility for my debt is paid.

Montana currently ranks last, in all the states, for public backed higher education. We expect our students, who often rank in lower income brackets, to carry an exceeding burden that other states do not expect of their students. This is what accessibility means to me. Accessibility means looking back only twenty to thirty years and seeing that the state backed education over 70%. That means, my parents, who are both University of Montana Alum, paid off their student debt while serving alongside my Plumb Creek worker family as teachers on the Flathead Indian Reservation.

It was Thomas Jefferson that said any generation should not be in debt for a past generation's decisions. Today I ask that you support Higher Education funding. Today I ask that you give our students who desire a formal education a chance to stay in Montana and work for wages Montana offers. Today I ask that you support public funding for Higher Education as an economic investment. Supporting Montana's students is supporting Montana's future.